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ABSTRACT

The college dropout problem and ways of solving it were discussed at the GT-70 Consortium Meetings on Student Attrition, held in Washington, D.C. in May 1973. The discussions centered around the profile of the dropout, anticipating the crisis, counseling, and alternative measures. The 23 recommendations resulting from the consortium meetings are grouped as to Pre-enrollment Activity, Enrollment Activity, and Post-enrollment Activity. Three recommendations for C.C.B. college are also made. (DB)

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RETENTION/ATTRITION

PREVENTING COLLEGE DROPOUTS

JC 740 142

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most perplexing and persistent problems in higher education has been the dropout--the student who, for one reason or another does not graduate from the institution in which he originally enrolled.

There appears to be general agreement that dropping out of school deliberately--either for a short period or forever--can be beneficial for many students. However, many dropouts, including both voluntary withdrawals and academically dismissed students are capable of completing college work; indeed, some of them are eminently capable in terms of their academic ability. These students waste their own talents, their possible contribution to society, and the time and resources of the community college.

Attrition was defined, (at the GT-70 Consortium Meetings on Student Attrition, May, Washington, D.C.), as a separation from the community college environment by graduation, transfer without graduation, officially withdrawing, deliberately "stopping-out," and informally withdrawing or not returning. Colleges must examine the reasons for these kinds of attrition and this may be done in three ways: finding the quantitative rates or percentages related to single courses, departments, divisions, the total college; doing factor analysis of demographic data which are self-related and those which are college-related; and using the subcultural approach by interviewing the administrators, the students, student personnel staff, faculty, and the community. Then the emphasis must change from attrition (negative) to retention (positive).

The most pertinent speaker (for C.C.B.) was the Dean of Student Affairs, from Essex County College, Newark, New Jersey. Mr. Jackson delineated the complaints and criticisms voiced by students at an urban college with a predominantly black student population. These included the de-humanizing rules, regulations, and procedures of the college. The atmosphere of the Counseling Center was "bad." Faculty receptivity of "the kids" was poor. The students needed study skills. Students knew there was a need to "bridge gaps" (remedials). They got the runaround or "I don't know" from clerks, secretaries, etc. The faculty doesn't understand the financial needs of students.

Faculty too narrow-minded when compared with students' expectations. Students from structured environments must be helped in "loose" one. No help in the growth and development of decision-making processes. Instructional methods not appropriate. Faculty should build on strengths (verbal abilities) while developing weaknesses. No employment possibilities. The counselors and faculty worked on six factors leading to attrition (study habits, reading, financial need, part-time employment, education and vocational counseling, and personal counseling) and were able to reduce their attrition rate by 11% in one year.

Profile of the Dropout

Extensive research has been conducted on the characteristics of the college dropout and the "persister." Academically, the dropout, as expected, tends to be less well prepared than the student who persists in terms of both ability, as objectively measured, and achievement, as measured by high school class rank.[1] Measurements of the ability and achievement of dropout and persisters are so similar, however, that no college can really claim that the dropouts didn't belong there in the first place. At most institutions, it would not be difficult, for instance, to match the high school academic credentials of a dismissed student with those of another student making normal progress toward a degree.

Non-intellective factors, demonstrate that the student who drops out of college generally comes from a lower socioeconomic background, plans initially to get a less advanced degree, and applies for relatively fewer scholarships.[2] Findings also suggest that the dropout tends to be more aloof, self-centered, impulsive, and assertive than the persister. Merigold[3] and Reboussin[4] concluded that the dropout--even when academically capable--sees himself as a relatively poor high school student. Merigold also found that the dropout worried about the lower educational level of his home, the need to make money, "...and a need for freedom to express himself." Cope found a relationship between dropping out and the "presses" of the college environment--institutional characteristics that frustrate or cause anxiety within students. For

example, the student interested in the social life at college might feel frustrated at an institution stressing intellectual values; conversely, the bookworm might feel miserably out of place in an environment oriented toward athletics or social events.

The Dean of Students from Longview Community College (Kansas City, Missouri) discussed the student's viewpoint at the Consortium in Wash., D.C. He notes six areas of conflict or weakness for recent high school graduates. These include the dependence/independence struggle, career indecision, the immediate-gratification-of-needs syndrome, weaknesses in interpersonal communication, poor self concepts, and trouble with perception of family's expectations.

Adults such as returning veterans, housewives, etc., have different problems, such as being away from formal education a long time, family obligations of married students, marriage adjustment problems, need for orientation of special nature, and perceived financial problems.

ANTICIPATING THE CRISIS

By analyzing the types of students who have withdrawn or have been dismissed in the past, C.C.B. can select new students who fit the pattern of persisters and design programs to overcome the problems of potential dropouts.

Research plays an essential part in the identification and monitoring of a retention program.

The first thing to do is to get the facts! Do these students have verbal needs? Do they need remedials? Is there a lack of money? Have they faced disillusionment with the loss of their expectations? Why come to college at all? Why not more "real world" in college? Do we need new attrition and survival data from the four-year colleges? Institutional changes must be made! This requires the total commitment of the college and long-range planning by all segments together. Financial adversity serves as a level to encourage cooperative efforts.

Other questions needed to be asked and answered were as follows: Do we really know our students? Are the college's goals defined? Are student services moving in the right direction? Are college and student goals congruents? Are goals discussed at in-service meetings? What do we really expect to happen to students who come to college?

We need well defined quantitatively-based rules to measure attrition: (a) from semester to semester, (b) from year to year. In curriculums and program areas we need a research instrument which will identify non-persistent students. A biographical instrument, "College Autobiographical Inventory," is in the process of development. It is claimed that this biographical instrument has predictive power that can identify one-half of the non-persistent population.

Attrition data based on attrition definitions--statistically analyzed according to some factor analysis such as (a) Self-related factors

(b) College-related factors
    (1) Faculty
    (2) Administration
    (3) Total institutional symbolic image

(c) Cultural factors

d. Demographic traits

COUNSELING

At Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, counseling is the core of the program to lessen attrition.[10] Flexible administrative policies have also assisted the student having academic difficulties. Allegheny students can normally count on a year in which to "hit their stride" before becoming eligible for dismissal. In addition, students having academic problems are helped to develop better study habits, choose more appropriate majors, and sophomores and even juniors are allowed to start over with fresh grade point averages so that previous cummulatives will not penalize later improvement. In this way, freshman academic attrition is held to less than 5%, and overall attrition in the first year is approximately 13%, compared to the national average of 26%.

In the Wash., D.C. Consortium, methods for retaining students in college were presented by Mr. Frank Christensen, Director of Learning Lab at William Rainey Harper College. He submits that the effectiveness of recruitment, counseling and educational advisement, student activities, and financial aid determine the rate of attrition on any campus. Admissions must plan their recruitment program (including brochures and other materials) for retention. Personnel in admissions must be trained to the same approach. The focus for student activities should be on involvement of students and not numbers per group. The counselors should serve as resource people for determination of retention programs. The office for financial aid must examine the <u>total</u> needs of the students. Mr. Christensen recommends using non-traditional methods for promoting retention, such as independent study, half-way houses for students not living at home, making it easier for students to come and go, giving credit for life experiences, teaching faculty to make better referrals, etc.

The faculty has the most contacts with students. The dynamics of proper referral need to be explored. There should be a total educational program for

the college, interrelating all facets. The faculty can encourage persistence by the quality of their teaching (creative, innovative methods), by their quality as persons (understanding selves as well as understanding students), by their attitudes (toward the students, the college, and other faculty), by ending subtle discouragement, and by establishing and expecting reasonable standards and fulfilling their responsibility to the students by bringing them up to those standards.

Mr. Christensen continued with suggestions for faculty commitment. They must become more involved with total student development. Contradictions in the students' value system should be examined and resolved perhaps by using human development seminars. "Humane is not permissive." These values should permeate compensatory (developmental) courses. Presidential support is needed, but the key to faculty involvement is the Dean of Faculty. New applicants need to be carefully screened and current ones should have in-service training (Maybe points toward promotion and pay increases for participation). If peer counselors are used for recruiting, faculty should be incorporated in their training sessions.

Personal attention from someone on the staff, individualized learning approaches, and staff development have been successful techniques. Have logical rules and regulations. Be sure that all facets of the college present some warmth and interest toward students. Sense new needs of students as they arise. The college should aim for a total climate conducive to learning and development. Students should be encouraged to take the remedials for their curriculum choice. After registration, study skills seminars should be held. The faculty can identify potential "failures" for counselors to help. Non punitive grades and easier procedures for changing curriculums can be started as well as a new mid-term entry possibility. When the student is in the process of leaving (or has gone), it is important that meaningful follow-up data be collected as well as examination of conflicting values with each student.

The importance of retention demands that all segments of the colleges (custodians, too) be involved. The administration should examine attitudes and implement

necessary changes, have information and staff available to properly process late applicants, and serve on every college committee. The faculty should serve as with the high schools, serve as summer advisers, participate with counselors to create learning resources, teach to the needs of the students, and use non-punitive grading. The student personnel staff should provide liaison among all segments of the college, handle admissions, train peer counselors for late applicants, and operate on the basis of present student values.

Alternative Measures

Although a program focused on the period when the dropout is deciding to leave college or is about to be dismissed is probably the worst approach to reducing dropout rates, it is better than no effort at all. Even the simple technique of requiring exit interviews has proven useful at many schools. At the California State College at Long Beach, students were required to fill out a form specifying their reasons and to discuss them with a counselor. George Demos discovered in a study[12] designed to distinguish the students' real reasons for dropping out of college from their stated reasons that:

> An interesting concomitant effect of these interviews, which speaks well for the advantages of terminal interviews, was that approximately 10% of the students who were planning to withdraw decided against it as a direct result of an interview with a counselor.

Ford and Urban have outlined what is possibly the best approach to reducing attrition rates.[13] It combines procedures established at admission time to assist potential dropouts with procedures to help those students who are missed in the first program. The program is built upon two assumptions: that the gathering of data is absolutely necessary for the program's development, and that the "best match possible" between the student and his environment should be sought. The collection of data regarding the admission, retention, and academic achievement of students must be a regular ongoing process. Seeking the best match between student and environment involves preadmission and continuing counseling so that the student can be guided before and after registration. At Pennsylvania State University, students are provided with counselors who have the authority to advise removal from a regular academic program for

a period, changes in major or college within the University, or changes in residence. From initiation of the program in 1958 to 1964, the number of academic dismissals decreased from 800 students per year to approximately 200 per year. During the same period, the number of students on the Dean's List increased from approximately 500 each year to 1000. Since grading patterns appear to have remained fairly stable, the rising academic quality of entering classes should not have affected these figures. The figures are even more significant when one considers that the University was annually increasing its enrollment during this period by between 500 and 1000 students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-Enrollment Activity

1. High School activities (i.e., athletics, student government, clubs, etc.) of entering students should be reviewed and checked as a routine part of the formal admission process at your institution.

2. Articulation should be carried out between counselors of C.C.B. and neighboring high schools relative to academic performance and learning potential of entering freshmen students.

3. Entering students should be counseled prior to initial enrollment (by college faculty and counselors) about occupational interests and curriculum program needs.

4. Administrative personnel should sponsor and/or participate in a number of "college nights" for pre-college students during the course of the academic year.

5. Academic testing and occupational placement testing should be conducted at your institution prior to final enrollment of entering freshmen students.

6. Entering freshmen students should be counseled by college representatives before final enrollment relative to their scores on standardized local and national tests (ACT test, CEEB, SCAT test, etc.).

7. Group counseling sessions should be conducted with entering freshmen students (prior to enrollment) relative to current issues in American society as well as current problems facing students in higher education.

8. A formal college orientation program for entering students should be conducted at your institution at the beginning of each semester.

9. Prediction instruments (i.e., attitudinal assessment questionnaires, personal opinion scales, personality inventories, etc.) should be used to predict dropout potential for selected students at your institution.

10. Basic student characteristics (age, sex, socioeconomic status, attitudes toward attending college) should be collected from students at your institution on a semester-by-semester or quarter-by-quarter basis.

Enrollment Activity

11. Periodic counseling sessions (mandatory or non-mandatory) with all students should be undertaken by the student personnel staff over the course of an academic semester.

12. During the course of a semester, efforts should be made to obtain research data from students relative to their perceptions of the college environment.

13. Faculty members in your institution should assist the counseling staff in identification and treatment of high risk students and/or potential dropouts.

14. The counseling staff at your institution should hold "seminar-type" small group discussions on a periodic basis with students who have demonstrated "dropout" potential.

15. Administrative techniques should be utilized in your institution which prevent students from formal withdrawal without first seeing a counselor.

16. Immediate counseling services (personal, social, and academic counseling services) should be accorded students upon request during the academic semester.

17. During the course of an academic semester, various testing instruments (i.e., vocational interest battery, personality inventory, aptitude tests, etc.) should be directly administered to students in your institution as the need arises.

Post-Enrollment Activity

18. Prior to withdrawal or at time of withdrawal, students in your institution should be required to see a counselor.

19. At time of withdrawal, parents of students executing withdrawal procedures should be contacted and a discussion should be held between institutional representatives, student, and parents.

20. Prior to withdrawal or at time of withdrawal, students in your institution should be required to provide information (by questionnaire, interview, or other techniques) relative to their reasons for leaving.

21. Following withdrawal from your institution, students who have not informed institutional representatives of their leaving should be contacted by telephone or mail regarding information as to reasons for termination of study.

22. Information concerning reasons for withdrawal of students at your institution should be circulated to faculty and administrative personnel and feedback from these individuals should be required.

23. Research data secured relative to reasons for student withdrawal at your institution should be written and published in report form and circulated to institutional staff and external public agencies.

Recommendations for Our College

1. Re-evaluate our admissions procedure from a psychological point-of-view as seen by the student.

2. Make use of the Office of Institutional Research to develop methods to produce scientific data based on some sort of symbolic interaction model. The data should be statistically treated so that factor analysis is possible as it applies to attrition.

3. Some time ago Professor Little and Dr. Lee wrote a grant proposal based on the hypothesis that the first three weeks in college are vital inasmuch as value and aspiration decisions are made. Our proposal was to have the computer monitor daily the progress of each student and list those students indicating need of attention at regular intervals. These students would then receive personal attention of the proper nature. Perhaps now with the motivation of fiscal urgency--a review of this proposal may suggest new approaches. (The proposal was rejected because it was not sufficiently experimental in design.) A review should be made of the number of general education courses offered to liberal arts students. It appears that allied health students have prime time general education courses monopolized.

FOOTNOTES

1. Alexander Astin, "Personal and Environmental Factors Associated with College Dropouts among High Aptitude Students," Journal of Educational Psychology 55, August 1964; and David L. Coker, "Diversity of Intellective and Non-Intellective Characteristics Between Persisting and Non-Persisting Student Among Campuses." Stevens Point: Wisconsin State University, April 1968.

2. Astin, op. cit.

3. Frank A. Merigold, "The Development and Testing of a Scale to Identify Male Dropouts at Liberal Arts Colleges." Chestnut Hill, Mass.: Boston College, March 1967.

4. Robert Reboussin, "Trends and Issues at Beloit College. Report 3, The Class of 1972," Beloit, Wis.: Beloit College, September 1969. ED 651

5. Robert G. Cope and Raymond G. Howitt, "A Typology of College Student Dropouts. An Environmental Approach." Amherst: Massachusetts University and Kingston: Rhode Island University, June 1969.

10. William P. Wharton, "Attrition in College." Allegheny College Bulletin 26, October 1965.

12. George D. Demos. "Analysis of College Dropouts--Some Manifest and Covert Reasons."

13. Donald H. Ford and Hugh B. Urban, "College Dropouts: Successes or Failures?" The College Dropout and the Utilization of Talent, ed. by L. Pervin and Others. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966.

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